

The Shifting Balance of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan: Division or Independence?

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On May 17, 2016, the political landscape of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was shaken by the signing of an agreement between the Goran Movement and the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).¹ The agreement is intended to create a unified Goran-PUK bloc in the region's parliament and to offer joint lists in the KRI's next parliamentary elections.² However, observers believe that this agreement includes an undeclared plan to incorporate important disputed territories – Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah ad-Din – in the region's next elections, which would come at the expense of the leading political grouping in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), because the PUK enjoys strong political support in the disputed territories. In addition to claims of a secret Goran-PUK agenda, the KDP argues that the new alliance is aimed at preventing Iraqi Kurdistan from declaring independence.³ Nonetheless, the rapidly changing balance of power in Iraqi Kurdistan may result in the unintended consequence of expediting the KDP's declaration of independence in order to outmaneuver the recently formed Goran-PUK alliance against it.

The new strategic agreement between Goran and the PUK comes at a time when the Erbil-based authorities have been expressing their intention to hold a referendum on the Kurdistan Region's independence from Iraq. In May, Massoud Barzani, President of the KRI and the leader of the KDP, announced that the KRI would vote on its independence by the end of 2016.⁴ This announcement came days after KDP-linked Kurdish diaspora organizations held mass demonstrations

¹ [“Rakkawtny Goran w Yakety Imza Kra”](#) [The Goran-PUK Agreement was Signed], *NRT* (Kurdish), May 17, 2016.

² [“Daqi Rekkatnamay Newan Goran w Yakety”](#) [Text of the Goran-PUK Agreement], *Rudaw* (Kurdish), May 14, 2016.

³ Sero Qader, live interview on *NRT* (Kurdish), May 15, 2016.

⁴ [“Iraqi Kurdish Leader Calls for Redrawing Regional Borders – And Attacks Fellow Kurds,”](#) *The Nation*, May 18, 2016.

in several European capitals to mark the anniversary of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement,⁵ and elements of the KRI's military force (*Peshmerga*) appeared in videos vowing to eradicate the borders drawn by the foreign ministers of France and Great Britain during the First World War.⁶

Beginning in 2005, the semi-autonomous KRI was governed in accordance with a strategic agreement between the KDP and the PUK. The agreement provided the KDP-PUK bloc with a strong majority in the regional parliament, and even included an almost equal distribution of bureaucratic and military posts between KDP and PUK cadres. While the agreement ensured the unity of the KDP and PUK-dominated regions of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah under the semi-autonomous government of the KRI, its functional existence also allowed both parties to preserve their bureaucratic domination in their respective geographic areas of influence.⁷

The first sign of change in the political landscape was the Goran ("change" in Kurdish) Movement's emergence as a splinter group from the PUK in 2009. Goran claimed that its establishment was a response to a deadlocked parliament that was prisoner to the KDP-PUK agreement that determined every aspect of political life in the region.⁸ The movement, led by a veteran Peshmerga commander Nawshirwan Mustafa, soon attracted a considerable percentage of PUK cadres and also a much smaller number from the KDP and other parties in the region. By finishing second to the KDP in the 2013 elections, Iraqi Kurdish politics were turned upside-down.⁹ The eighth cabinet of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) was initially formed by a KDP-Goran coalition, notwithstanding the existing 2005 KDP-PUK agreement. The PUK, which was once an equal political partner of the KDP, found itself marginalized by the new balance of power conditioned by a parliamentary majority that consisted of KDP and Goran members. The new cabinet included PUK representatives only after a prolonged negotiation.

In fact, empowering Goran at the expense of the PUK was a strategic decision by the KDP, which was seeking a final victory in its historical conflict with the Sulaymaniyah-based movements. The KDP sought a gradual but managed transfer of power from the PUK to Goran, which did not have military forces under its control or its own bureaucratic cadres in Sulaymaniyah. The KDP

⁵ "[Kurds Across Germany Chant 'Time for a Kurdish State'](#)," *Rudaw*, May 14, 2016.

⁶ @BaxtiyarGoran, Twitter post, May 16, 2016, 10:41pm
<https://twitter.com/BaxtiyarGoran/status/732294872422592513>

⁷ Arif Qurbani, "[Parti Kurdistan Dabash Dakat?](#)" [Is KDP Dividing Kurdistan?], *Rudaw* (Kurdish), December 12, 2015.

⁸ "[New Kurdish Party to Challenge Polls](#)," *BBC*, March 6, 2010.

⁹ "[Complete 2013 Kurdistan Regional Government Elections Results](#)," *Musings on Iraq*, October 9, 2013.

believed the transfer of power from the PUK to Goran would allow it to unite the separate bureaucratic apparatuses of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

However, the political landscape in the region went through another substantial change when the Islamic State (IS) invaded the predominantly Kurdish-populated territories of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din in the summer of 2014. The Kurdish expansion into the regions abandoned by the Iraqi military in June 2014 not only increased the KRG's territory by roughly 40 percent, but also placed the traditional PUK stronghold of Kirkuk under Erbil's rule.¹⁰ Once again, the KDP and the PUK proved to be the two leading military forces on the ground, because Goran did not have a military arm. During 2014-2015, the PUK was the only Kurdish party that raised its flag on the front lines facing the IS, extending from south of Erbil to northeastern Diyala, which is a large and predominantly Kurdish-populated region. Furthermore, the PUK used its strong military and bureaucratic dominance in Sulaymaniyah to prevent Goran from assuming local administrative posts, including the governorate of the province that Goran had won in the 2013 elections.¹¹

The PUK's resistance to Goran and its unilateral control over a large Kurdish population in the disputed territories have undermined the Goran-KDP alliance. Goran and the PUK compete for support in the Sulaymaniyah area; and the addition of the disputed territories to the PUK's constituency following the IS invasion in 2014 has diluted Goran's influence in the area. This led to a rapprochement between Goran and the PUK in mid-2015, which resulted in a joint parliamentary proposal to change the semi-presidential system in the KRI to a full parliamentary system, ending the KDP-Goran coalition.¹² The PUK-Goran rapprochement created hostility between Goran and the KDP, resulting in violent attacks on KDP offices in Sulaymaniyah by Goran supporters and televised military marches by KDP-linked Peshmerga in Erbil.¹³ In October 2015, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani dismissed Goran cabinet ministers,¹⁴ and the KRI's security forces prevented the speaker of the parliament, Yousef Mohammed of Goran, from entering Erbil after a trip to Sulaymaniyah.¹⁵

¹⁰ "[Peshmerga Kirkuk Kontrolkrd](#)" [Peshmerga Controlled Kirkuk], *Rudaw* (Kurdish), June 12, 2014.

¹¹ "[Yakety Bo Posty Parezgay Slemani Taslimi Goran Nakat?](#)" [Why Doesn't PUK Hand Over the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah to Goran?], *Kurdistan Post* (Kurdish), September 15, 2014.

¹² "[Goran w Yakety Cakht la Sistamy Parlamani Dakanawa](#)" [Goran and PUK Emphasize the Parliamentary System], *Rudaw* (Kurdish), July 28, 2015

¹³ "[Kurds Rail Against Government Corruption as Protests Turn Violent in Iraqi Kurdistan](#)," *IB Times*, October 16, 2015.

¹⁴ "[Chawdereky Siyasi: Prkrdnaway Posta Wazariyakany Goran bo Parastny Mafy Khalka](#)" [A Political Observer: Replacing Ministerial Positions of Goran is According to Protect the People's Rights], *Peyamner* (Kurdish), October 10, 2015.

¹⁵ "[Parti: Yusif Mhemed Tanya Datwanet wak Hawlatiyeky Asayi beta Hawler Agar Keshakan Charasarkra](#)" [KDP: Yousef Mohammed can Only Come to Erbil as an Ordinary Citizen if Issues will be Resolved], *Nakhsha*, October 21, 2015.

The KDP-Goran hostility revived the long-feared division of the KRI into two administrations, one in Erbil and the other in Sulaymaniyah. Nevertheless, the creation of a separate Sulaymaniyah region could only be realized with support from the PUK, which controls the entire administrative bureaucracy in the province. However, the PUK benefited from differences between Goran and the KDP, and restarted negotiations with the KDP to restore the 2005 power-sharing agreement. The PUK's two-pronged strategy consisted of stabilizing relations with the KDP for the sake of a unified Iraqi Kurdistan, while at the same time withdrawing its support for the Goran-led opposition against the KDP, making Goran increasingly dependent on the PUK. Although the Goran-PUK agreement is considered to be engineered by Nawshirwan Mustafa, the rapprochement between the two parties was a result of the PUK's placing itself between its rivals, the KDP and Goran.

The current PUK-Goran agreement still falls short of outnumbering a possible KDP-led coalition with other Kurdish parties and independent MPs. However, a third wave of change in the political landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan may well occur in the near future if the KRI decides to include the recently captured territories of Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah ad-Din in the next elections. A recent article by Adel Murad, a leading member of the PUK Politburo, explicitly emphasized the involvement of these regions in the electoral process as an undeclared priority of the Goran-PUK agreement.¹⁶ The PUK's strong base of support in oil-rich Kirkuk could be enough to form a majority government with Goran, if the Goran-PUK alliance succeeds in forcing KDP to support a bill to include these disputed territories in the electoral process.

The shifting balance of power in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is closely related to the pan-Kurdish claim of a greater Kurdistan region in Iraq. The Kurds of Iraq claim sovereignty over large parts of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din provinces. During the past two years of fighting the IS, the Kurds have achieved a de facto control over these areas. The PUK, which traditionally enjoyed the majority of support in most of these regions, excluding Nineveh, has been the primary beneficiary of these territorial gains. Therefore, the annexation of the de facto Kurdish-ruled regions of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Salah ad-Din to the Kurdistan Region could easily make the PUK the absolute winner in the next KRI parliamentary elections. This has set off alarm bells in the KDP, particularly because the annexation of the disputed territories is a fundamental goal of Kurdish nationalism that the KDP can't object to, even if it means losing its parliamentary majority in the KRI.

¹⁶ Adel Murad, "[Rekkawtny Yakety w Goran](#)" [The Agreement of PUK and Goran], *PUK Media* (Kurdish), May 8, 2016.

However, the KDP is not out of options yet. In order to balance the rising PUK-Goran bloc, it can use the Barzani revolutionary charisma to push the KRI to declare independence. In fact, since the Goran-PUK negotiations began last month, the KDP has claimed that the alliance is aimed at preventing the region's prospective independence. A day before the Goran-PUK agreement was signed, a prominent KDP-linked politician and intellectual from Iraqi Kurdistan, Sero Qader, publicly vowed that the Kurdistan Parliament will not convene and Massoud Barzani will rule Iraqi Kurdistan until its declaration of independence, just as Charles de Gaulle did in France. Qader declared that Barzani was relying on his revolutionary legitimacy, and the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be stopped by either Goran or the PUK.¹⁷ Similar comments were made by Hemin Hawrami, the KDP's head of foreign relations. On the day that the Goran-PUK agreement was signed, Hawrami said that Goran would not be allowed to return to the cabinet until next cycle of elections in September 2017.¹⁸ As a result, it seems as though Iraqi Kurdistan's political parties are maneuvering for administrative control over the government at the expense of a functioning parliamentary system that distributes administrative power between them. Ironically, it is this internal contest for power, rather than Erbil's long-standing disputes with Baghdad, which may hasten the birth of an independent Kurdistan in the Middle East.

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¹⁷ Sero Qader, live interview on *NRT* (Kurdish), May 15, 2016.

¹⁸ Hemin Hawrami, live interview on *Rudaw* (Kurdish), May 17, 2016.